



Kevin Milaeger

# Milaeger's

## What Vegetables Can I Plant Now?

Kevin Milaeger

**Everyone is anxious** for the spring planting season. After a couple of warm days in early April customers start asking for tomato plants. Of course, it's way too early to plant them outdoors but some folks want to put them on their windowsill, I guess. We always have a limited number of tomato varieties available for early-bird customers. We can't talk to every customer about the futility of planting the garden too early (especially with plants of subtropical origin, such as tomatoes) but we try to get the message across. Last year I stopped at a local grocery store that was selling tomato plants in April. The plants were stored outdoors. I made several trips to the store over the course of a week, and it was a cool week. Here is a photo of the last tomato plant that remained. I feel sorry for the person that ended up buying it. Although alive, it will be stunted and so its growth will be well behind smaller plants planted at the correct time. The purple coloring of the stems and leaves is a sure sign of stunting. The worst part of this scenario is that the person who bought it will end up having a bad gardening experience and may sour on gardening entirely. That would be sad indeed.



grocery store stunted tomato

Well, if it's too early for tomato plants, then what can I plant? you might ask. There is much you can plant safely. Anything in the cabbage family---cabbage, kale, broccoli, cauliflower, collards, kohlrabi, brussels sprouts, and others. Virtually any lettuce (the lettuce and "cabbage" plants can be



radish seedlings, ready to be thinned out

grown from seed or from starter plants.) Other greens such as kale or Asian greens like pak choi. Anything in the onion family, including regular globe onions, scallions (green table onions), leek, shallots, chives, and garlic. I usually plant all of these from bulbs or young plants. From seed it's time to plant radishes, beets, and peas. Many herbs can be planted, for example oregano, mint, sage, parsley and thyme. The ever popular basil is the

most obvious exclusion---basil is probably the most weather sensitive plant we offer---sometimes June 1st is too early! Other plants that you should definitely wait on include tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, cucumbers and beans (all of subtropical origin.)

April 27th is the average last frost date here in Racine. That is about ten days from now, and the forecast for those ten days also shows no frost, with the lowest night temperature being in the mid 30's. I'm optimistic, but cautious. Just because it doesn't freeze doesn't mean the plants will be happy. There is no surefire method to determine the best date for a particular plant. But you can start with is a quick Wikipedia search of a given plant to determine where in the world it is native to. If it is from colder climes, it may well be tolerant of cool weather. If it is of tropical origin, it is much less likely to tolerate cool temperatures. This is only a start---there are a number of plants that don't follow this rule. One is asparagus. People think that because they pick it "wild" along the railroad tracks that it is native here; it is not. It is native to much of Europe, but also North Africa and western Asia. Because the Greeks were some of the first people to write about asparagus, it is sometimes assumed to be native there; it is, but its range is much greater than just Greece. The ancient Egyptians grew it, but it didn't arrive in northern Europe until the 1500's. This sort of information is fascinating to me, partly because the story is never fully known---new facts come to light every once in a while.



newly planted lettuce March 30<sup>th</sup>

April 16<sup>th</sup>

It is relatively easy to deal with the cold tolerant plants in April; after all, they are cold tolerant. Much more problematic are the tropical/subtropical plants that are usually planted in May. There is much less room for error when planting them out,

particularly with the mid-May threat of the "Three Icemen," also known as the "Ice Saints." Never heard of them? As with much of European folklore, their hazy history has many versions, depending on which country or region you might be from. The three principal Ice Saints are Mamertus (May 11), Pancras (May 12), and Servatius (May 13.) There is a blurred rumor of a fourth, Sophia, who is part of the tradition in Germany and other countries. It all boils down to a likely cold snap in mid-May. I first heard the story in the 1960's from an old time greenhouseman in Milwaukee. He was rather vague about the "Icemen," as he called them, simply telling me to be wary of them, and then raising his eyebrows.



two month old leeks, ready for planting

Many of you have visited the Great Lakes Farmers Market that we have been hosting at our Douglas Avenue location since last fall. The market will be moving from our expo greenhouse out into the sunshine on April 26----it will be located on our nursery lot, at the north end of our property. The east end of the market will be just a few steps from our vegetable trial garden. I'd like to invite you in for a visit to the garden on Sunday, April 26. I'll be in the garden, explaining what we are doing from 11am-12noon for sure, maybe longer. Please stop by and see what's happening in our garden!